

The Idiosyncrasies of Korea

Gunja Elementary School, Siheung
Jemma Sutton

This morning I woke up, opened the blinds and looked out onto the neon lights and bustling streets. In my view I see the vegetable sellers peddling their produce at full volume on megaphones or loudspeakers, shouting out the sales of the day to passers-by. The Bongo trucks are out in full force, rumbling by on diesel engines, bringing all matter of cargo to their various destinations. Buses of various shapes and sizes, from big green buses to tiny, mini-sized yellow ones, thunder through the streets chartering children and adults alike to work and school. Children run to schools and hagwons, shouting in Korean at the tops of their lungs, while others shout into their mobile phones, dealing with business before they have even reached the office. I smile to myself and think “Wow I’m In Korea.” This is my second year in Korea, but every morning I still wake up and look out of the window and just feel so thankful and blessed to be in this beautiful country.

When I first told people I was going to live in South Korea to teach English, I was astounded at the amount of people who reacted in horror because they thought I would come back in a casket! Some people clearly need to scratch up on their geography. In Europe as soon as you say “Korea” the initial image conjured up is that of North Korea. While many people know about China and Japan, Korea is sometimes forgotten, which is a complete shame, because it is a country with so much history and gems and is grossly underestimated. My time in Korea has been like a rollercoaster; some days are filled with complete highs and other day’s lows. There have been awe-inspiring, mesmerizing moments, but also moments where I have asked myself what I am doing here. In this essay I will talk about some of my experiences adapting to a different culture. I hope that by reading this more people will understand Korean Culture and feel inspired to become a GET.

Every day is an adventure in Korea. The language barrier is perhaps the biggest challenge and when you realize that you are in a non-English speaking country,.

Communication is necessary for survival, whether it is at school, in a taxi, on the bus, or in a shop trying to buy food. Sentences become words and have to be altered and adjusted in order to get your message across. Pointing, gesturing, drawing pictures and a mobile phone that has a Korean/English dictionary have been paramount to my survival in Korea. As frustrating as miscommunication may be, there is no greater sense of satisfaction or feeling when you can order yourself some 떡볶이, or haggle on the price of some trousers. These small moments of success are why I love Korea. They can change a day filled with stress, anxiety and doubt into a day of hope and optimism.

On the subject of communication, one important point to mention is that when a non-native English speaker is conversing with you they may say something that appears as offensive, but in actual fact this was not their intention. They are not fluent in your language and are often unaware of the context or a particular word and thus misuse it. This has happened to me on many occasions. My advice would be to try and take a step back and understand that they are not trying to be offensive, but have just chosen the wrong word, or their pronunciation is a little off. The English language is full of phrasal verbs and adjectives that can mean different things when placed in different situations. This can also be the same in Korean. My co-worker is called 동철 Dong Chul, however being a native English teacher and not a Korean one I was pronouncing his name as 똥철 (Ddong Chul) which in Korean means faeces. Clearly this provided much amusement to my students when I said it in class and blushing from Dong Chul. Sorry Dong Chul! It is really frustrating that 'ddong' and 'dong' are completely different words and as much as I have tried I cannot tell the difference in their pronunciation, although Koreans can! After that incident I have avoided calling him by his name and instead refer to him as 선생님(teacher). This incident taught me however that things aren't always as they seem when learning a language and the slightest sound difference can make something completely innocent into something rude or offensive. I try to remember this when I hear something in English that at first seems rude.

Even with these language barriers and cultural differences, Korean people are extremely understanding. If you make an effort with them you will have few problems. Out of all the countries I have lived in and travelled to, Korean people are by far the most generous and will always go that extra mile to make sure you are ok. There are countless examples I could give, but I will name a few to illustrate my point. When I first came to Korea I couldn't read hangul, so I relied on my 'I'm a foreigner, if lost send me back to Siheung piece of paper'. It was my first week in Korea and I accidentally took the bus in the wrong direction and ended up in a place where old buses go to retire,

surrounded by rice paddies. I remember thinking to myself “Oh dear! How am I going to get myself out of this one?” The bus driver could clearly see I had no idea where I was. He asked me where I lived and I got out my piece of paper. He then called my director and drove me home, even though it was out of his way. This is not a one-off case either, Korean people are so kind and compassionate if you are ever lost or need help someone will always try to help you, even if their English is limited. Korea is also one of the safest places to live. The crime rate is relatively low in comparison to the rest of the world. If you lose your mobile phone or wallet you are almost certain to get it returned. I left my brand new phone in a taxi and the driver drove miles out of his way to ensure that it was returned to me. It is because of instances like this that I love Korea with all my heart. Sometimes Koreans will insist that you need help, or try and give you preferential treatment, even if you don’t always need it. One time I was talking to an old man on the subway. When I say old, this man was probably about eighty or ninety and spoke English surprisingly well. We were having a pleasant conversation when the train arrived. He went and sat in the designated place for the elderly and disabled. I only had a few stops before I disembarked, so I stood up. The old man was adamant however that I was a guest in his country and should therefore sit down. I assured him I was perfectly ok, but he was still adamant that I should sit down. He then proceeded to try and drag me from one end of the carriage to the other. Well.... It was more like I was skating with an elderly man attached to my arm! I didn’t end up sitting in the elderly chair and it caused a big scene which was a little embarrassing, but nevertheless I appreciated his effort and his heart was in the right place.

When I first arrived in Korea the most noticeable difference I found was coming from a multicultural country to practically a homogeneous country. It’s a rare day when I’m not called a “외국인” This means foreigner in Korean. Normally I go to school by car or subway. When I get on the subway I’m usually the only foreigner present. I’m either stared at with curiosity or given an intense glare. To begin with I thought that this kind of a glare meant that I wasn’t welcome in Korea, but I now realize that what I thought were evil glares, were in reality that people were waiting for the right time to say “Hello” or practice their English with a foreigner. I will also have children or babies stare at me or look at me and pull at their mother’s arm then point at me. I’ve made babies cry just by looking at them. I’ve had tired Koreans heads lean on my shoulder as they fall asleep next to me. I never feel lonely in Korea; because every day is a unique experience and if I want to talk to someone all I have to do is go outside.

Approaching foreigners can however be intimidating for some people. In a country

where standards are high many Koreans are reluctant to speak English because they fear making mistakes and facing ridicule, so instead they stay quiet. When I first started my school I assumed many teachers could not speak English, this in fact was not the case. It was just that they were too shy to approach me and had no confidence in their English ability. Koreans are shy to speak English, but if you invest your time, talk to them and get to know them you can make worthwhile friendships. The teachers at my school for example just needed a bit of encouragement and praise. It is also sometimes better to have conversations one- on- one, so that they feel like no one is judging them and they can speak openly. I have also noticed that when students see the other teachers talking to me and making an effort, they feel more encouraged themselves to try, instead of saying “I can’t speak English, it’s too hard” I find that students also perform better when they are in an informal situation. Outside of class students try hard to speak to me. At lunch times I sometimes play games with them, or draw pictures. It doesn’t matter about their English ability; the important thing is that they know that I care about them.

As a teacher I try to enforce the attitude that it doesn’t matter how many mistakes you make, as our learning experiences are more important than our mistakes. It is essential to be patient with students and encourage them to try and to teach confidence through innovation and the ability to achieve, even at the most basic exercises. Fear seems to be by far the number one factor in hindering English Education in Korea. Small measures can be taken to resolve this. I have found that interactive activities have been the most effective way to get students talking, as well as adding energy to the classroom atmosphere. When the students are taking part in activities and having fun they forget about their fear of English and participate. A good example of such a game is “The Bomb Game” I usually make this by using ‘Microsoft Powerpoint’. Students are divided into teams. Each team must choose a picture from the screen. For example: A bowl of rice. The students in that particular team must then say the target language for that particular topic, e.g. “Can I have some more rice please?” Each square of food has a point behind it, but there are also bombs and dynamite lurking. If students select a square with a bomb the their team loses all of its points. If they pick a dynamite box everybody’s points disappear. The great thing about this game is that it’s a game of chance, as well as ability and ensures that the weaker students in the class get to participate with their group and have an equal chance of winning.

There are many resources out there, such as songs, video clips, role plays, and board games. You just have to be creative. If you have any hobbies, such as music or art then

incorporate them into your lesson. I am fortunate that at my school we have several after school programs, which have been pivotal in improving English education. My school has a special class, an advanced class and a program for the students struggling with English. I see grades three and four for two hours a week (special class) and grades five and six for four hours extra a week (advanced class.) These students also take part in an English musical class, where they learn English through music and songs. A high number of students applied for this program, so each student had to take a test and have an interview giving their reasons for why they wished to apply. The school I teach at is located in a rural area, where there is a lack of hagwons, so I know that many of the students and their parents appreciate these extra classes. They are also free, which I think is superb, as it ensures that not only the elite will succeed in English.. The problem that I have in a number of my classes is that the level is so mixed. There are some students who are basically fluent in English, whereas others struggle to read and make basic sentences. It seems unfair that students whose parents have money and can afford to send them to English academies or hagwons should be the 'achievers.' This is why I think that having extra curricular activities in every school should be a necessity. Students can have the chance to converse with a native speaker, as well as honing their skills.

It is also the time when English really comes alive and that students are given the opportunity to shine. Class sizes in Korea are so big, so it is sometimes difficult to see who is struggling and needs extra help. My school again has been superb and have implemented an after school course for the weaker students to catch-up. Again this could be another way to improve English Education as a whole. Far too often the naturally gifted students are selected for such programs and the students that really need help are forgotten. This program not only benefits the students, but also helps with the regular class, as it ensures that I can move at a faster pace and do more challenging activities, without worrying that some students won't grasp the material. The children in this class also feel more comfortable participating and are starting to gain confidence and as a result try harder to participate in the regular class, instead of giving up at the first hurdle. Teaching the weaker students is probably the most challenging of all of my lessons, but it is also the most rewarding. There is no greater satisfaction than seeing the light switch on for a student. In this class I have witnessed students that have no enthusiasm for English and really struggle in the regular class progress so much. They feel comfortable in this environment and consequently are motivated to study English. I cannot express how important I think it is for every school to have a program like this.

Extracurricular classes are also a fantastic opportunity to incorporate Western culture into the lesson and show the students a different world perspective. Recently my advanced class and I studied “Harry Potter.” First we watched the movie and discussed it. We then learnt about the different characteristics and personality traits of each of the houses of Hogwarts, as well as the symbols associated with each house. The most fun part of the lesson was when the students wrote their own potions. First of all we went through the new vocabulary and discussed potion ideas, then each student wrote their own potion for example “How to make somebody smart, thin etc” The end results were really creative, such as “Add two beetles, then stir in some tigers tears.” Students would then have to say something to make the spell come to life, such as “Smart, smart, I am smart.” The lesson after this the class was divided into four teams (The four Hogwarts houses). My co-teacher and I prepared various ingredients. For example: Bat’s blood was tomato ketchup, chocolate cookies were beetles and so on. Each team had to create a new potion, read it out aloud and then finally make it. This provided a great deal of laughter and memories, but more importantly the students never forgot the vocabulary learnt, as they remembered and associated it with the Harry Potter lesson.

Aside from the after school program I feel that the regular program could be improved by increasing the amount of time students study English. At the moment grades three and four have only one hour of English a week. Learning a language requires practice and repetition. In a class of forty students, this time is not adequate enough for students to feel comfortable speaking English. Foreign languages must be practiced daily in order to be successful. A way in which this can be achieved is to utilize your schools broadcasting room and make the students repeat key phrases every morning. This will drill the vocabulary into their heads and only takes five to ten minutes every day to achieve. The curriculum textbook also needs updating and should include role play texts to save time printing them out and gluing them into the books. There is also no writing until the fifth grade and even then it only includes a few words. When students reach middle school they are expected to write complex sentences and memorize many words and vocabulary. To avoid this large jump there should be more of an emphasis placed on writing and sentence structures at an earlier age.

Another way to improve English Education in Korea is to provide more training for KET and NET teachers together. Korean English teachers do not have an orientation session nor do they receive any formal training on how to co-teach, or work with a

native English speaker from a foreign country. Far too often courses are planned separately for NET teachers and KET teachers, which creates even more of a divide than is necessary. Instead of segregating NET and KET teachers, more effort should be put into training them together and working as a team. It goes without saying that the relationship you have with your Korean teacher is crucial to the success of collaborative teaching. For co-teaching to be fully effective, there needs to be open communication, use of humor, mutual respect, flexible equality, complementation of each other's strengths, and collaborating on teaching roles. The Korean teacher, for example, is often more experienced and is better able to manage his or her classroom. The native English speaker, on the other hand, usually has more time to create fun, interesting lessons and materials. Collaborating with each other also invites the students to take a more active role in the classroom and by interacting with each other KET and NET teachers can model a good learning environment. The better you work as a team, the more successful the lesson will be, after all two heads are better than one.

I have been lucky with both of my co-workers. They both have different styles of teaching and it has taken time to get used to each other's styles, but we have been able to work together and incorporate our strengths to ensure that our lessons are successful. As a native teacher you spend a lot of time working with your co-workers and rely on them, so it is worth the effort to try and make a good impression and get to know them. Take them out for coffee or make them some traditional Western food. You will be surprised at how little things like this will make the difference and thus make your working relationship stronger. I feel like my co-teachers have become my friends too and have helped me adapt to my life in Korea and have a greater understanding of Korean culture. Thanks 동철 and 은진. I love you both!

To conclude, to be successful in Korea requires that you recognize and accept that there will be differences which may make you feel uncomfortable from time to time. If you are closed minded and expect everyone to adjust to your cultural views while doing no adjusting of your own, you are going to be miserable. If you remain positive and enthusiastic you will have few problems. My outlook on many things has changed since I have been in Korea, and I have become much more open minded, namely towards cultural differences and how important it is to respect them. I'm amazed at how things such as my communication skills have improved, as well as my confidence and my skills with interacting with others. I also feel like I have been exposed to hundreds of situations which would never have happened to me in the UK, and therefore I feel like I can relate to many new things which may have seemed alien to me before, and also

adapt to lots of new challenges. The many stories and anecdotes which I'll bring away with me from here will enable me to always have something valuable and unique to talk about. It is quite ironic in that writing this essay I have realized that there are many cultural differences between Korea and the Western world, but to be honest I had forgotten, because I have adjusted to Korean life and feel comfortable here. These differences are more like idiosyncrasies. They cause frustration of course, but they are also the things that make memories and an unforgettable experience.

Thanks for reading my essay and good luck in Korea. I hope that you enjoy the experience as much as I have. I will leave you with photos of my students making and presenting their Harry Potter potions.

